

The Blanc-Erlanger House  
924 Moss Street

Architectural Rating: Blue  
Construction Date: c. 1816-21  
Architect or Builder: Unknown

#### Nomination Information

Date: July 14, 1983  
Nominated by: Ron Pursell  
Seconded by: Camille Strachan, Eugene Cizek  
Recommended by: Staff

#### Site Description

Second Municipal District, Seventh Assessment District  
Square 463, Lot 14  
Lot size: 103'-9" (front on Moss Street) x 185'-9" (side nearest St. Philip Street) x 192'-6" (side nearest Dumain Street) x 101'-10" (rear)

Zoning: RD-2

Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin F. Erlanger

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural significance. Each of the four criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Ordinance #5992 M.C.S., will be examined individually. This information will be the basis for a final decision about the designation of this property.

#### Architectural Significance

The house located at 924 Moss Street along the banks of Bayou St. John is one of a handful of examples of French colonial architecture that survive within the boundaries of the City of New Orleans. Other buildings in New Orleans that exhibit this architectural style include "Madame John's Legacy" at 632 Dumaine Street, the Lombard House at 3922 Chartres Street, the Pitot House at 1440 Moss Street, and the "Spanish Custom House" at 1300 Moss Street. The Blanc-Erlanger House is therefore significant not only in and of itself but as part of a small and precious collection of a rare style of building. French colonial architecture developed as the result of the interaction of French building types and the climate of the New World. Early French houses in their American colonies had tall, steeply-pitched hipped roofs, usually in a pavilion form (that is, with a short roof ridge running parallel to the front and rear facades). Such houses were modified in warmer climates by the addition of wide porches. These porches were at first formed by extending the hipped roof out beyond the walls of the building, but at a lower slope, thus forming a distinctive double-pitched roof form. Such a roof can be seen on the Pitot House of 1790, the Destrehan plantation house (c.1970), and the Spanish Custom House. Later, single-pitched roofs became predominant among rural French colonial houses. In the French tradition, the roof eaves were supported over the porches by slender turned-wood colonnettes. Rural examples were raised up on masonry basements to lift the living quarters above the danger of flooding; the porches were themselves usually supported by massive masonry columns or piers. The traditional

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French floor plan eschewed interior hallways and prominent doorways. Instead, each room was accessible from the outside by full-length openings with paired French doors, and interior circulation was accomplished by the rooms opening directly into each other. According to A Field Guide to American Houses (Virginia and Lee McAlester, 1984), only a few hundred examples of the rural French colonial house, mostly built in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, still survive in the United States. Most of these houses are associated in the public mind with the Southern plantation, and indeed the French colonial style contributed greatly to the development of the stereotypical antebellum Greek Revival plantation house.

The Blanc-Erlanger House incorporates many of the characteristics of the rural French colonial house. The original main living floor, constructed of brick between posts, is raised up on a stuccoed masonry basement. Six masonry columns covered with stucco and ornamented by a very simple capital support broad porches in both the front and rear. Slender turned-wood columns at the second level support the eaves of a single-pitched hipped roof. The roof extends beyond the side walls as well, where it covers narrow balconies that are both cantilevered from the wall and suspended by iron hangers from the eaves. There are two small dormers in the front slope of the roof, and two chimneys (with different orientations) break through it near the ridge. There are five openings in both the front and rear facades, and two in the sides, at each floor. All of the openings are full-length, and all of them — except for the central openings in the front — are square-headed with simple molded frames and paired French doors. The main stairway between the first and second floors was originally in the rear gallery, until an elaborate curved stair was installed at the rear of the main hall around 1930.

There are several features of this house, though, that are not typical of French colonial architecture. The plan is based on a central hall that runs through the house from front to rear, and which shows itself on the exterior by the elaborate central doorways on both floors. The center-hall plan is an English/American house plan, adopted in Louisiana under the influence of the Americans who flooded into the New Orleans area after 1803. The center door on the ground floor is differentiated from the others by its round-arched transom with curved muntins. The central doorway on the second floor front is taller and wider than the other openings on that floor. It is also framed by pilasters supporting a relatively-simple entablature that rises to the soffit of the gallery. The actual door is recessed behind this Greek Revival frame. The door and its sidelight and transom seem to have been added in the late nineteenth century, and are not stylistically consonant with the rest of the house. Nor, for that matter, are the turned-wood balusters on the galleries and balconies, which likewise are probably late-nineteenth-century additions.

The first European owner of the land upon which the Blanc-Erlanger House stands was Etienne Langlois, a Canadian-born soldier and trader who was granted a concession of land in 1720. Langlois' concession measured three arpents (an arpent is the equivalent of 180 feet and was a standard unit of land measurement) along Bayou St. John, south of the Bayou Road (now Bell Street), by forty arpents in depth. The property traded hands several times during the rest of the eighteenth century, and the various owners alternately added to and sold off pieces of the plantation.

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Apparently the portion of the property near Bayou St. John was a working farm at this time; the rear of the property was undrained swamp. In 1781 Andres Almonester y Roxas, royal notary, patron of the Cathedral and Cabiláo on Jackson Square, and father of the Baroness Pontalba, purchased the land around the present-day house, which by that time measured sixteen by twenty-two arpents, along "with various buildings build of wood and brick." Almonester in turn sold eight arpents of the plantation to Louis Antoine Blanc in 1793, and the rest in 1798. Blanc was born in France and became an appointed official in the Spanish, French, and American governments of the city. Blanc's land fronted on both Bayou St. John and the Bayou Road, and he apparently maintained a house along the Bayou Road. Shortly after the Louisiana Purchase, Blanc sold most of his land to Daniel Clark, retaining the portion closest to the Bayou and the Bayou Road for himself. In 1809 Clark subdivided a large portion of his lands into the Faubourg St. John, which bordered Blanc's land along the Bayou Road (Bell Street) and what is now North Gayoso Street. Clark began to sell the rest of the land behind the Louis A. Blanc property in 1811 to Blanc's son Evariste, who was a banker, businessman, and land speculator. Clark's death in 1813 accelerated the process, as his former partners and executors sold yet more land to Evariste Blanc, including four arpents in 1821. In the meantime, Blanc purchased his father's property, except for a small portion between Bell and St. Philip Streets (which at Louis A. Blanc's death went to his widow). Blanc eventually owned all of the land bounded by the Bayou, the Carondelet Canal (now Lafitte Street), Dorgenois Street, Faubourg St. John, and his mother's small holding. The existence of the Blanc-Erlanger House is first documented with certainty during the ownership of Evariste Blanc, as his own house.

In the summer of 1834, however, Blanc negotiated the sale of all of the land described above to the City of New Orleans for the sum of \$45,000. The Zimpel map of 1834 shows the land and house as the property of the Corporation of the City of New Orleans. Ostensibly the city wanted to use a part of the property as a cemetery, which existed for some years after 1835. Blanc's motives for the sale are unknown, but may have been related to the beginning of Myra Clark Gaines' interminable lawsuits to recover the lands owned by her father, Daniel Clark, as her inheritance. Blanc built for himself another house at 1342 Moss Street which is very similar in appearance to the house that he sold. Soon thereafter, in 1837 the City subdivided the land and began to sell it off. It also turned over the house and its outbuildings to the church for use as an orphanage, which operated from 1836 to 1840. The house and its square of land were eventually auctioned off in 1846. Their ownership during the rest of the century changed often; no one owner held them for more than a decade. Among these owners were Felix Labatut, Blanc's brother-in-law and a city official, around 1860, and Charles Longue, a city councilman and state senator, in the 1880s. The square bounded by Moss, Dumaine, and St. Philip Streets and Hagan Avenue was finally subdivided in 1904. Walter Parker, a noted economist, purchased the house and its lot in 1920 and began its renovation, including the construction of the existing outbuildings. Parker and his wife owned 924 Moss Street until 1972, when it was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Erlanger, the

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present owners. The Erlangers have over the course of the last decade engaged in an extensive and impressive renovation, removing many of the alterations made in the 1960s to house a school, and making the house into an attractive and comfortable residence today.

The question of the date of construction of the Blanc-Erlanger House is one for which there is no definite answer, there being no known building contract or description of the construction. The documentary evidence is sketchy at best. There exists a sketch map of New Orleans dated from about 1723, showing the land concessions along the bayou together with crude representations of buildings. There are also two maps from the 1730s by Dumont de Montigny, which are imprecise but provocative. In the approximate area that this house now stands, on both maps, is a representation of a house in a fenced yard surrounded by cultivated fields. The drawings of the house show a two-story hipped-roof building with five openings on each floor — a general description of 924 Moss Street. These drawings may accurately depict this very house, which would make it an extremely valuable early structure; but they may also represent a building that was destroyed, they may inaccurately show the configuration a building on the site, or they may be more or less imaginary. There is simply no documentary evidence to support any conclusion based on the Dumont maps. The 1798 map by Carlos Trudeau, depicting land ownership along the bayou and Bayou Road, shows no buildings. It is not until a survey map drawn by Joseph Pilie, City Surveyor, in 1822 that the present-day house is accurately represented, labelled "etablissements de M. Evariste Blanc". Another survey map made in 1826 shows the whole complex of main house and outbuildings, as does the celebrated map drawn by Charles Zimpel in 1834.

If the evidence of maps is sketchy, that drawn from written documents is even more so. There is no mention of a house on the property in the will of its owner in 1773, Madeleine Brazillier Duplanty. When Andres Almonester y Roxas purchased the land in 1781, he also bought "various buildings built of wood and stone," but there is no more definite description. Louis A. Blanc is noted in some documents as residing in a house on his plantation lands, but this seems to refer to a residence along the Bayou Road. Since his widow owned land at the bayou and Bell Street after his death, and the Zimpel map shows buildings on that land, the Louis Blanc house may have been at that site. There is little other documentary evidence, and none of it is definite or conclusive.

Architectural evidence is somewhat more instructive. The most striking element of 924 Moss Street in this regard is the center-hall plan. This house plan was not used by the French colonials and the Creoles until after the influx of Americans into Louisiana after 1803. It was an English plan adopted and extended by the Americans who brought it to New Orleans. This floor plan, and other American features (such as double-hung windows), began to influence Creole house design in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The Greek Revival doorway and the turned balusters are not reliable indicators of the age of the build-

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## The Blanc-Erlanger House (continued)

Page 5

ing, since they were not in general use until after the house is known to have existed (and therefore each seems to have been added later). A comparison of the Blanc-Erlanger House to other French colonial plantation houses in Louisiana is interesting. The house at 924 Moss Street is similar (especially in roof and column types) to the Mary plantation house in Plaquemines Parish, from the late 1700s, and to Homeplace plantation house in Hahnville, built in 1801. The most striking resemblance, however, is to the Labatut House, built in 1790 in Pointe Coupee Parish near New Roads by the Spaniard Don Evariste de Barra. The house passed into the Labatut family when de Barra's sister married General Jean B. Labatut. Gen. Labatut was Evariste Blanc's father-in-law. The similarities between the Labatut House and the Blanc-Erlanger House extend from general size and arrangement, type of roof, and forms of columns, down to the use of flush horizontal board siding on the second-floor facades under the galleries. Such similarities suggest the possibility that the house on Moss Street may have been modeled upon the one in Pointe Coupee Parish, which would not be surprising considering the family connection. In any case, a review of the evidence leads to this conclusion: although there is a possibility that the house may have been built in the eighteenth century, it is probably the case that it was constructed by Evariste Blanc for himself and his family between the time that he purchased the land from his father in 1816 and the building's depiction on a survey map made in 1822.

### Architect

None.

### Historic Personages

As described above.

### Social, Cultural, or Historical Importance

As described above.

### Staff recommendation:

For designation. The staff recommends, however, that the Commission designate just the main house and not the outbuildings, which date from around 1930 and are not integral to the character and quality of the main house.